



to divide the territory in two by extending the line that already existed between Canada and the United States to the east. When the British turned down his proposal, Polk demanded *all* of the Oregon Territory, right up to the latitude line of 54° 40'N (the southern border of Russian Alaska). His supporters adopted the slogan, “Fifty-four forty or Fight!” The British backed down and both sides finally agreed to Polk’s original offer to divide the Oregon Territory at 49°N latitude. This extended the existing border between Canada and the United States westward to the Pacific. It gave Americans the future states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho, while Britain kept British Columbia. The peaceful resolution of this dispute was good news because Americans were already at war in the south.

The Mexican-American War

President Polk was already thinking of other ways to add more territory to the United States. Polk had his eyes on the Mexican provinces of Upper California and New Mexico. He knew these northern borderlands were underpopulated and far from the center of Mexican national life in Mexico City, just as Texas had been.

There was also a small dispute about the border between Texas and Mexico. Now that Texas was part of the United States, this border had to be clearly defined. Mexicans believed their border with Texas was the Nueces River. Americans claimed that it was farther south at the Rio Grande. Polk sent troops into the contested area between the two rivers. From the Mexican point of view, Americans had entered Mexican soil. Some believed Polk’s true purpose was not to settle the border dispute at all but to start a new war.

When Mexicans finally fired on American troops, Polk immediately asked Congress for a declaration of war. Americans were confident that defeating Mexico would be easy. Mexicans felt they were defending their way of life against



The Historian's Apprentice

Ulysses S. Grant was one of the soldiers who crossed the Nueces River under General Zachary Taylor.

“We were sent to provoke [*cause*] a fight, but it was essential that Mexico should commence [*start*] it. It was very doubtful whether Congress would declare war [*unless*] Mexico should attack our troops . . . Accordingly, preparations were begun for moving the army to the Rio Grande.”

—Ulysses S. Grant

1. Based on this passage, what was Grant's view of the reasons for the U.S. occupation of this area?
2. Consider this issue from multiple perspectives. “Multiple perspectives” refers to other points of view. What do you think was the Mexican view of the U.S. occupation of the area between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River? What was the official American view of the occupation?

an aggressive neighbor. The war actually lasted for almost two years.

General Zachary Taylor had commanded the troops that first crossed the Nueces. These troops now pushed further south, becoming the first invasion force into Mexico. A second force headed west through New Mexico, one of the territories Polk hoped to annex. A naval force was also sent to the Pacific coast to claim California.

U.S. forces quickly occupied these border provinces. Their successes, however, could not persuade the Mexican government to agree to surrender territory to the United States.

President Polk decided to send General Winfield Scott with an invasion force into the heart of Mexico. Scott was the general who had supervised

the first steps of the Cherokee removal. Now he sailed with his army to Vera Cruz on the coast of Mexico. Scott attacked the city with cannon fire. Then he landed his troops and began the march along the “National Road” towards Mexico City. It was the same route the Spanish conqueror Cortés had taken 300 years earlier.

Mexicans were unsure how to cope with these events. No one in the government was willing to give up territory to the United States. General Santa Anna, who had been sent into exile, returned to take charge of the nation's defenses. All Mexicans rallied around the former dictator. But Santa Anna failed to listen to his advisers and made several costly mistakes. Instead of patiently waiting for Scott's army, he marched his

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1. Why did President Polk turn to Congress to ask for a declaration of war?
2. Did the President have the power to start a war without the approval of Congress? Explain your answer.